

Lost / Displaced Architecture

العمارة الشريفة

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Abstract

This essay argues that an architecture that merely focuses on style, individual or historic, needs to redirect the focus to a contextual architecture that is sensitized to social, cultural and economic needs. Importantly, such a shift in focus may not be evident nor easy to maintain given that architecture is constituted of several dilemmas: a dilemma of style, a dilemma of ethnocentricity, a dilemma of non-linearity, a dilemma of change, and a dilemma of diversity.

Keywords: architectural style, displaced architecture, ethnocentricity, change and diversity.

Introduction

Architecture was never created in a social, or economic, or religious, void. Rather, architecture was created, and originated, in response to the needs of society. Many architectural appraisers and critics have merely discussed questions related, from near and far, to social and historical issues such as why a particular style of building at a particular time appealed to particular people. What has been overlooked by critics is that preference for a particular style is likely to lessen one's ability to appreciate other styles and thus render other styles, so to speak, impalpable.

Similarly, the appraisal of architecture as the highest form of fine arts risks the possibility of it being reduced to a sculpture or art form. For Ruskin, there are only two possible fine arts accessible to the human race: sculpture and painting. Accordingly, what we call architecture is only the association of sculpture and painting in noble masses, or the placing of them in fit places. Le Corbusier proclaimed in his own dogmatic fashion that styles were a lie. Schopenhauer remarked that architecture, to the extent that it fulfills practical purposes, cannot be called art because serving utility entails attending to the will, i.e. to material needs rather than pure cognition. This essay purposes to shift architectural and art critics' preoccupation with style towards a contextual architecture that is geared towards addressing socio-economic and socio-cultural needs. It argues that the drift contemporary architecture is currently undergoing and which could be better described as lost or "displaced architecture" needs to be stemmed and re-directed towards a socially constructive architecture.

The dilemma of Architecture

Architects seem to have no faith in a definite system of rules but are propelled, and commonly sabotaged, by the rule of astonishing. The architect submits to a tension between stability and change, between the production of existing forms and the invention of new ones. It is a submission by necessity and not by choice; for when change is not prompted by inventiveness, it is prompted by boredom. Conversely, the architect cannot invent without reproducing. In order to make a meaningful innovation, he must concentrate his creative force upon a few aspects of his work that favor fresh departures. For the remaining aspects, he relies on the support of his tradition and of his environment. Indeed, an architect cannot invent himself out of his time and if he ever could, he would succeed only in making his work incomprehensible by abandoning the framework in which it might have been understood.

Style

Flexibility causes radical shifts of style in the course of a generation. Whereas in ancient Egypt for instance, stability predominated to the point that barely perceptible innovations were sufficient to secure the vitality of a style for three millennia. Change and stability are primeval forces determining style and cannot be invested with value except in terms of some preconceived image of man's destiny.

If style must exhibit some stability and flexibility then all of its possible characteristics cannot contribute in equal measure. Conventions of form and of symbolism yield the richest harvest of traits by which to distinguish style. We form an image of the style of an individual by observing the interaction of his private conventions and the public conventions of his time and place. I mean by conventions an accepted vocabulary of elements such as scale, an architectural order and a syntax by which these elements are composed into his building, or otherwise. One of the most persistent challenges of architectural history is to explain the motivations, behavior, and pace of change in style.

Ethnocentricity

We are ethnocentric in the sense that we act, think and evaluate inside the decorum of our culture, inside a pattern to which the tacitly implied rules in the work of architecture belong. Changes of decorum depend upon time and cultural milieu, age, temperament, education and class. There are two main types of ethnocentricity. There is an ethnocentricity in time from the point of view that one epoch has a value system different from those of other times. There is an ethnocentricity in geography from the point of view that different cultures at a particular time will have different value-systems.

We cannot erase our established image of the totality of a style whose process of formation occurred in the past. Nonetheless, this should not discourage us from trying to interpret a work of architecture in terms of its proper context rather than its effects. This could be made possible by gaining perspective within the process at points short of its termination. At any one of these points, we could find an architect designing a religious institution, for instance, a mosque. He, too, is aware of works preceding his, and of designs being made by his contemporaries. Such precedents constitute an important resource in the formation of his style, but he is not aware of the designs which follow his. He knows only past and present. He accepts and rejects aspects of what he finds in things about him and he adds something of his own.

By his choice and by his contribution, he moves a step away from the past. Are we then justified in saying that he has moved toward the future? From his vantage point, the future is a void. He may happen to contribute to the future, but only by having concentrated all his powers on the making of something intrinsically worthwhile in the present. Architects communicate experiences rather than expectations. Anyone who seeks to alter or to accelerate the change of style in the hope of anticipating the future is likely to become like a fashion designer, an expert in and purveyor of taste.

Non-linearity and Architectural 'Impedance'

What we call evolution in architecture should not be described as a succession of steps towards a solution to a given problem. We cannot speak properly of a sequence of solutions to a given problem since, with each solution, the nature of the problem changes. The pattern of change is a product of the tension in society, and in the architect, between the instinct of stability / security of established schemes and human capacity resulting partly from biological and psychological differences for creating something unique and individualized. Change is slow when the former is stronger, rapid when the latter prevails. As a rule, the factor of stability gets more support from society and its institutions while the factor of change from the individual imagination. Notice that creative vision is seldom granted to groups!!

Given this background, it is necessary to emphasize that a nation is a religion to resist, rather than promote, change in style. Nations show a tendency to keep certain kinds of innovation and to cast out other kinds. It is

by this conservative post facto pressure that society affects architecture. Indeed, the demands of a society and the inclinations of architects make the innovations of the latest work by contemporaries in the same culture expressly interesting because they represent attempts to solve, in a familiar language, the kind of problem which is most challenging at the moment. But the creative process is complex enough to be stimulated at many points. Often, the architecture of earlier times or foreign places offers solutions to such problems, too.

Form as a generative and individual process

So, inspirations may come from far as from near. Sometimes, especially in the formation of new problems, an architect may experience and put to use, in making a work of architecture, anything in his environment. The historian must reconstruct as much of that environment as possible. Each work of architecture can be considered a repository of experiences in the architect's surroundings. This is so much so that it owes a special debt to great predecessors of the same tradition.

Change in style is a manifestation rather of the imagination of an individual architect than of historical forces that guide the actions of men and nations. An architectural idea is often said to exercise a shaping influence on the particular form in which it occurs. This concept of form as a generative process has become axiomatic in most writing about form, the initial force of a composition in the invention of some definite theme. Specific generative tendencies are inherent in the nature of a particular idea.

The form of works of architecture varies with the qualities of the material in which they are executed. If they are executed in steel, or wood, or stone, they must necessarily differ in form in accordance with the inherent properties of the materials. Forms arise from the inner nature of these materials. Why does a particular idea tend to generate a particular form or at least a certain type of form? In what sense is the unfolding of that form inherent in the idea? Form obviously has some functional relation to the materials. The kernel of development, unfortunately, almost unexplained.

Change, Unity and Variety

In any case, however, little may actually be explained in words. That little must surely have the utmost bearing on the interdependence of form and style; an interdependence that constitutes one of the most neglected problems in architectural history.

One such principle, not fully explained in words, is the familiar requirement of form in every design to achieve variety within unity. It is important to iterate that a basic means of achieving unity in architecture is by repetition of primary material; meanwhile, a basic means of achieving variety is by contrasting a subordinate material to the primary material.

Alternatively, a space is perceived initially as a whole, and only afterwards in more detail, remaining all the while in view. When the theory of organic unity claims that any inadvertent subtraction or addition would diminish the value of the work of architecture as a whole while also changing the character of all the contained parts, it does not necessarily follow that every part is equally important, in terms of prominence or impact. Does anyone hold as factual that any subtraction or addition changes the character of all the contained parts of a work of architecture when referring to the ancient law of organic unity as the master principle of aesthetic form?

By organic unity we mean the fact that each element in a work of architecture is necessary to its value, that it contains no elements that are thus not necessary and that all needful elements are there. The concept of unity is allied to the idea of art or skill, whereas the concept of variety is allied to the idea of creativity or genius. Maximum unity tends to curtail variety. Many of the weakness in present day design can be traced to inhibitions which derive from erroneous assumptions about human behavior. A clearer and more scientific understanding of people should help liberate architecture from these inhibitions and give rise to buildings which are more satisfying for their users.

It has been assumed that psychology has a very broad relevance for architects. The environment they manipulate has been taken to cover as wide a perspective as possible including spatial and visual aspects as well as lighting or acoustic levels. For if human behavior is so erratic or unpredictable that it is impossible to find principles which underlay it, or discover trends within it, then it would never be possible for one person to produce buildings for others to use because he would never know what to expect of the users nor they of him.

The problem is that many people do not seem to think as highly of buildings as the design professions do themselves. More often than not, people had quite different conceptions of what the buildings were meant to be. One group is probably concerned with judgments people had made of what it looked like, the other group with the actual effects of buildings on what people did.

Most architects are constantly involved in what a building looks like. In effect, this means that they are trying to create a physical form which will be perceived in a particular set of ways. Many buildings, however, seem to be designed as if the users come to them with a standard set of reactions which remain throughout their contact with the building.

Designers do not agree on what is the precise nature of the design process. Designers understand that designing is a decision-making process in the face of uncertainty with high penalties in case of error. Notably, there are limits to the range of change with which a person can cope without suffering psychological breakdown. Some designers have fallen into some traps when using a set of inappropriate social values as the basis for their designs. Designers must consider not only the problem-solving aspect but also the context of the design itself in order to see if that might tolerate design intervention. Designers must also have an awareness of the real world and a feeling of accountability for the consequences of failure in design.

Diversity or Disunity

The characteristic most expressive of the contemporary architectural scene is diversity. Unfortunately, in response to those architects who regard significance in architecture as a corollary of order, the 'diversity approach' to architectural problems is producing chaos in our city spaces. The internal world of our thoughts has become divided and the result has been a lack of unity in our lives.

The architects of this century have produced numerous brilliant individual structures, but this has been at the expense of the unity, harmony and scale that are fundamental to a civilized and healthy environment. In search for the new, it is easy to overlook the limited role that isolated buildings in the city can assume. The architect must attempt to bring diversity into a harmonious and viable unity with the intention to preserve while not allowing diversity to freewheel into chaos. It is a delicate, yet vital balance. Chaos comes from uncertainty and indecision; convictions are the prelude order for unity.

Conclusion

Art and science have been pursuing diverse paths and architecture was left adrift. The result was a period of reaction from the most important facts of the time. Eclecticism produced an architecture detached from the reality of the pressures of the industrial revolution. What architecture needed was not a nostalgia for the past however beautifully executed, but the utilization of industry's new potential in order to tackle its own particular problems.

Architects are exploiting the futuristic potential contained within buildings by turning actuality and progressiveness into stylistic features. The new virtual reality is imitated and adapted in contemporary architecture, with science fiction, imaginative backdrops and an expressive range which extends from deconstruction to digitalism; designs intended to dramatize the world and blur the border between walking reality and the dream state.